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Irma J. Long

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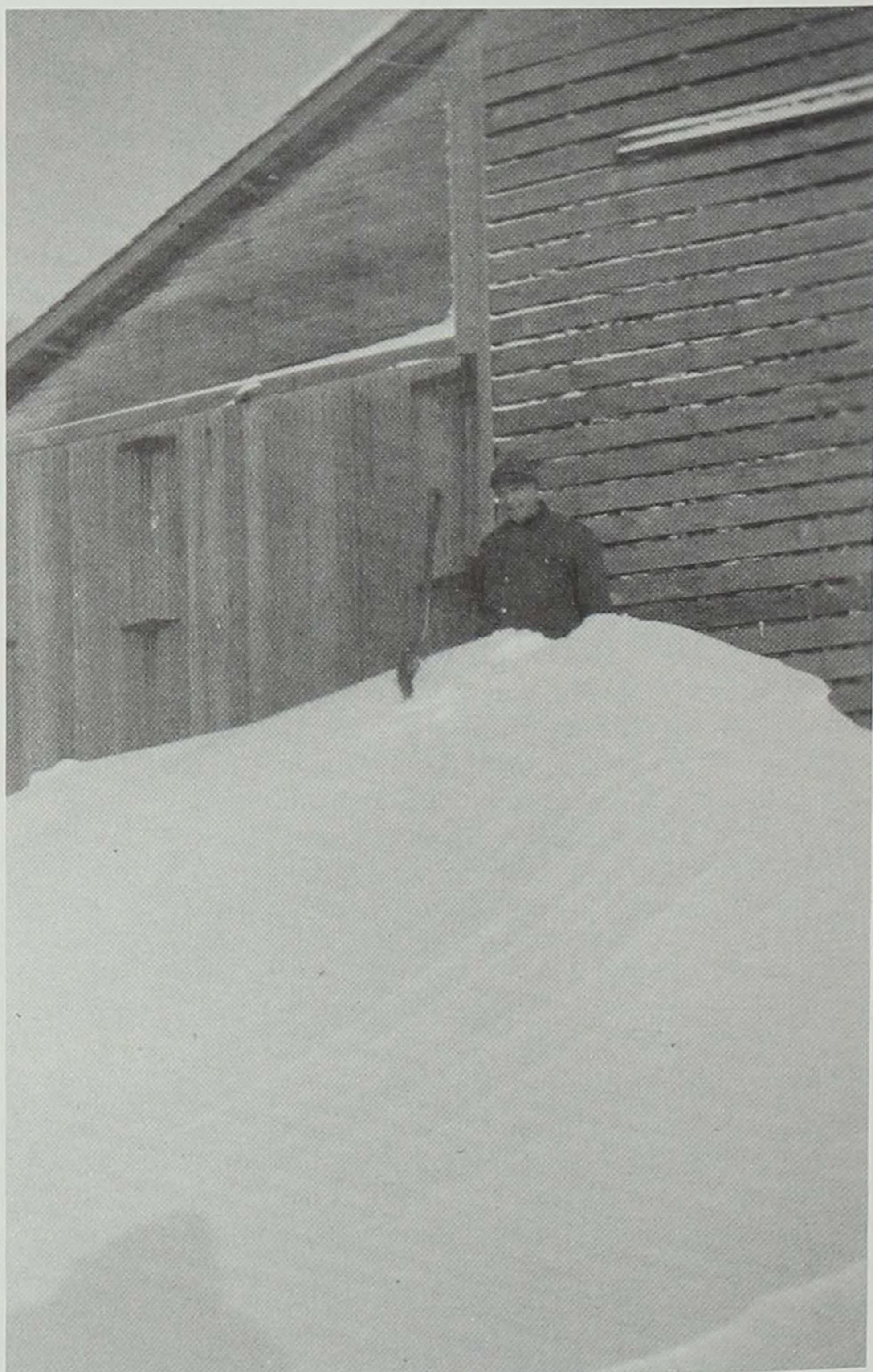


# The Winter and Summer of 1936

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by  
Irma J. Long

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**Editor's Note:** *The weather of 1936 tested Iowans already weary from the Great Depression. "In the short space of about 6 months," summarized the Iowa Weather and Crop Bureau's monthly review in July 1936, "Iowa has experienced the most prolonged severe cold and the most prolonged severe heat in a period of at least 117 years." Severe blizzards and a month-long cold wave froze Iowa to a standstill. Frequent high winds blew the light, dry snow into drifts ten to fifteen feet deep, taunting the efforts of road crews. Half of Iowa's farmers, living on side roads, were snowed in for weeks. Trains and mail were delayed. Coal was in short supply. Schools and churches closed, and businesses cut back. The ground froze to depths of five or six feet, and some rivers to two or three feet. The summer was no easier, as heat and drought locked Iowa in their grip.*

*In 1936 Irma J. Long wrote a letter and a "memorandum" that present the weather in a context of a few square miles in Grant Township, Woodbury County. The letter and memorandum (edited slightly for publication here) give a strong sense of community and of the people within that community. In 1936 the author was a teacher at Grant Township Dis-*

*trict School Number 8. The school was eight miles from the Long family farm, where Irma lived with her parents. Her brother Harold lived in an adjoining house and farmed with her father. Irma's sister Helen taught school in Mapleton, twenty miles from home. Bethel Church was three miles from the Long home. The lawn and grove by the church were called the "community grounds," the site of picnics, Fourth of July celebrations, and other neighborhood get-togethers.*

*In the brittle cold of February 1936, daily tasks became small dramas of survival. In the July drought, trying to fall asleep at night was exhausting. The two following pieces speak of the cruelty — and the beauty — of nature. They speak, too, of the humor that Iowans called upon to make it through the winter and summer of 1936.*



*Irma J. Long in 1938. Left: Her father in 1936, at the crest of a snowdrift. (courtesy the author)*

WOODBURY COUNTY, IOWA  
FEBRUARY 14, 1936

DEAR HELEN,

Do you remember that poem about cutting the heat because it was so thick? Well, I think it might almost be said of the cold we've been having — a thick, biting cold that penetrates clothes, buildings, and even nooks a few feet from a fire.

I am going to try to describe as accurately as possible some of our own experiences and those of others about us during these last few weeks — weeks which will be memorable, and which we can use to match the stories of the old-timers (as Harold says), and also which, in future years, we as old-timers can tell to other generations. The future generations may think

we are simply telling wild tales in order to hold our audience, for really conditions are worse than you'd think would be possible in this progressive age. One would naturally think that the weather, along with the years, would acquire some of the dignity and culture of the world, but it seems to have reverted to the stone age in all of its brute strength, fury, and tenacity. Like Mussolini, it seems impregnable to criticism as well as to suffering and want.

But why mention the conditions which we are all familiar with through our reading of the newspapers? Perhaps I had better limit myself to those local conditions in which you would be interested because they deal with the people you know. The difficulty is that I scarcely know where to begin.

I guess I'll start with two weeks ago next Monday — though that makes us begin a week



or so after the sub-zero weather and some snowstorms began. On that particular Monday Harold took me to school and walked with me up the last hill which could not be used by cars on account of the snow. He took my bag and went over to Iva Bennett's with it, so that I might stay there that week. Before noon we were in the throes of an old-fashioned blizzard. Snow was whirling across the fields in wavy clouds. The wind roared about the schoolhouse and flung the snow from one drift to another. At times the sheets of snow were almost blinding.

Shortly after noon, Jimmy Miller came for the children. I sent the Huey boys also, in order that they might have someone to make a path for them. The boys bundled up securely and started off. Jimmy was in the lead, making a path. William followed and made the path a little wider. Little Junior was next and then the rest of the boys brought up the rear, all in single file. I waited until 2:30 and then I left for Iva's. You should have seen me! Galoshes, leggings, an old pair of knickers over my dress, a woolly cap, a woolly scarf, overcoat, mittens! I was so bundled up that I bulged in all directions. I wallowed out of the schoolyard through snow about waist high, and started on my mile-long walk. I made the journey safely, but others were out in the storm and Harold was one of them.

He had taken his old Ford down to the garage to be fixed. On his way home, east of Huey's, he got stuck in a snowbank. He shoveled a long time. At last Woody Willmott came along behind him, and Earl Smith came from the other direction to help Woody get home. After about three hours of shoveling they all went on. They encountered enormous snowdrifts after leaving the gravel, but at last landed at Willmott's. Harold left the old Ford there and started for home on foot. He was already tired out from shoveling, and the drifts made walking cruelly hard. Between the church and our old mailbox he began to give out. In order to keep his feet going, he kept muttering to



*Irma and Harold Long bundle up to face an Iowa winter. (courtesy the author)*

himself, "Left, right — left, right — left, right," until the words and the accompanying step became automatic. At times he squatted down in the snow to rest a minute, but he dared not stop long or he would have frozen in a short time. He really became fearful that he was not going to reach home. But when he reached the old mailbox, strength seemed to return and he got along better. Cora saw him coming along the road so slowly that it didn't seem like Harold at all. Mother said that he stopped in the shelter of the little cedar tree by our gate and then came on. Another safe arrival.

The next morning after having slept at my birthplace for the first time in a quarter of a century (how long that sounds!), I had a touch of anxiety for myself, though it was nothing like Harold's. I waded from Iva's to the gravel, went on to Jackson's, where I stopped for a little pail of water, and started on. When I left the gravel the walking was hard. I had always thought I should be able to wade through anything, but I knew before I got to the top of that hill that wading can take more strength than I had expected. I started up the road, but the walking was so hard that I went into a field. That, however, was worse; I wearily climbed



## The weather seems to have reverted to the stone age in all of its brute strength, fury, and tenacity.

back onto the road. The hard crust broke with each step, and my mind struggled with the problem as to whether I ought to try to keep going or if I dared to stop and rest. My feet either ached or were numb. The rest of me was so hot that my clothes were damp. At last I got through that last drift, which brought me onto the school ground.

I was so tired that day that I didn't even try to clean off the porch. I had only three pupils, and so I sat a good share of the time. I don't remember ever being so tired for a whole day. But by night I felt pretty good and got along much better — partly, of course, because going downhill was easier than going uphill.

The following Saturday was to be Claud Renneker's funeral. He was to be buried at Bethel. The roads had been opened that far for the procession. But on Saturday we had the blizzard that climaxed the whole weather situation. It raged all day. At times we could not even see the gravel road plainly, for the air was hazy with snow, driven by a wild wind. People who had been away from home late the night before could not get home; the roads were blocked.

Sunday afternoon Dorothy and I started out for the gravel to see if I could get through to the school. We had a real lark, trying out great snowdrifts to see if they would bear our weight — and many of them did. When we sank in, we would manage to roll out in some manner or other and try some more. As it happened, we had no school the following Monday and the Oto school was closed, too. So Dorothy and I went to my school, to try out the road. We got along splendidly, because some of the drifts

which filled the cut were hard enough to bear our weight.

About twenty men and a snowplow were opening the gravel so that the funeral could be held on Monday, but that had to be given up, as they got only a mile or two out of Oto the first day. In one place the men scooped snow to men standing above them, and these in turn scooped it on over the drifts. Tuesday night the snowplow got to Willmott's but could go no farther, for the scooping which had been done was too narrow for the plow to pass through. There was some talk of bringing Claud's body down that night, before the roads filled again, but that had to be abandoned. The next day the crew of workmen came out again, and the road was opened to the cemetery.

Our men had seen to the digging of the grave, of course, but Dad didn't go to the cemetery on Wednesday, as walking through the drifted fields was so hard it tired him out terribly. Wednesday morning Harold went to the cemetery and told the men that Mr. Hudgel was coming with the body. At last, about noon, three cars including the hearse arrived at the cemetery. They had to wait there about fifteen minutes or so until the last-minute shoveling could be done. The cars were very lucky to have had no longer a wait than that. Needless to say the service was a hasty one. Rather a pathetic and lonely ending for Claud, but he was past worrying about it, and it was the best that could be done under the circumstances.

After the funeral Harold and Jess rode to town with Leonard and Leo Dicks. Everyone was about out of supplies, and so Leonard's



car was loaded down (to say the least) on the return home. I presume that the combined weight of Harold, Leonard, and Jess must be about 600 lb. Well, between Jess and Leonard in the front seat were two half-sacks of flour. Under Jess's feet was a box of supplies. So Jess of necessity sat with his feet stretched out straight in front of him. Leonard had a three-gallon can of apples under his feet. In the back seat between Harold and Leo was a fifteen-gallon can of kerosene, besides a big box of groceries. Harold held a gunny sack of groceries and also had a two-gallon can of gas. Leo was likewise weighted down. In the empty spaces were empty cream cans that had been taken to town. Once Harold got a cramp in his foot and had to get out of the car. Once in a while a loaf of bread would land behind somebody's neck and have to be rescued. But again a safe landing was made with only one casualty, and that was a poor benighted loaf of bread badly twisted and mangled from having been sat upon by Leo.

All the schools were being closed; no town schools in the county were open, and Wednesday I had none either. I rode home — that is, as far as Earl Miller's with Earl and Wesley. I

walked on to Jess's where Harold was waiting for me. He then loaded himself down with his gunny sack of groceries; I took a great stack of belated mail and the gasoline, and we started out.

We walked through the shoveled road in the cemetery, and it was such a beautiful spot that I can't forget it. The evergreen branches with their deep, rich green, weighted here and there with splotches of snow, and the perfect whiteness of the cemetery itself with only the stones, tree trunks, and a few of the taller shrubs breaking the whiteness seemed to signify nothing more nor less than a perfect, peaceful, and beautiful silence. And then to climax the beauty was the shoveled pathway with the snow banked a couple of feet on either side of us, as we walked up the snow-covered lane. Surely Claud couldn't have wished to be taken up a more beautiful aisle than that path.

Jess and Clarke saw us over the fence into Paulson's pasture. Harold went ahead and I followed in his footsteps. One step would be high, the next would go down a couple of feet, the next would be plain wading, and then we'd suddenly find ourselves on top of the snow again. The old path was covered, and so we had

*Blizzards of 1936 forced Iowa farmers to tunnel through drifts to reach livestock in outbuildings. (SHSI)*





## Men scooped snow to men standing above them, and these in turn scooped it on over the drifts.

nothing to follow. Harold did a good job of looking after me and had me stop to rest now and then.

When we reached home, Mother mentioned that you had thought of coming home, but she thought you must have decided to go with Dorothy. Harold, very untactfully, said, "Well, don't you *know* whether she's coming or not?" Neither Mother nor I voiced any feelings, but his question set us both worrying within our own minds. I thought, although I knew better, that you might have come to the church and started on without letting Jess know that you were there. If you tried to come by the road I knew you never could make it, and in my imagination I could see you lying in a dark heap on top of the snow south of the old mailbox. I should, of course, have seen only the point of your cap with the rest of you sticking straight down in the snow, if my imagination had made a little truer picture of what would have happened in such a case. I knew you weren't out there, but the picture recurred several times. Anyway, we were all glad when you called from Merville the next day.

Wednesday Ruth Miller's school closed, and as she had been boarding at O.C. Hoyt's just across from the schoolhouse, she didn't know how bad the roads were. She started walking home — a walk of six miles. The roads were, of course, impassable. At times she had to crawl on her hands and knees. When the Curtins saw her coming she was just barely moving. I guess she was completely played out. She rode the rest of the way with the Curtins. Both sides of her neck are very sore where they were frozen. Her nose was also frozen quite badly.

Yesterday (Thursday) we began to get shoveled out. Mr. Pederson and Lindy came down

and with our men and Mr. Rahtz made a road through our forty across the road into Paulson's field and on down to Paulson's. They were almost out of supplies and so the Pedersons went on to Sioux City. Their car was already down at Paulson's. Along toward evening a strong wind came up. (You know about this as you were stuck in it on your way to Graham's.) Lindy and Mr. Pederson got stuck on the gravel over by Pithan's. After shoveling about an hour, the car struck gravel and the wheels spun so, that the chain broke. They could go no farther. They carried their groceries to Pithan's and started to walk home. But the drifts were terrible. Already the wind had blown everything full. At times they, too, had to crawl on their hands and knees. By the time they reached Ettler's, Mr. Pederson was worn out and so they stopped there for the night. Mr. Pederson's face was frozen, but they got it thawed out, and he said he was given a comfortable bed.

Mr. Pederson stopped in this afternoon; I wish I could give you his conversation with its funny little brogue. Dad can mimic him to perfection but I can't, even on paper. After he had gone this P.M., Harold asked Jess which one could mimic Mr. Pederson better, Dad or Mr. Pederson himself. It was surely funny to hear him tell of his experience, but the experience itself must have been terrible.

This morning he started to walk home and made arrangements to meet Lindy on the gravel nearer home. Dad asked Mr. Pederson how he came and he said he did not know — over fences and fields. He was about "petered out" when he got home. He had then done his chores, gone down to Paulson's again, and stopped in here. When he got here he was just



worn out. But he could laugh and chat as if he'd had no trouble at all. We phoned to Lindy for him, and let him know that the roads were too blocked for his father to meet him, and so he, too, had to walk home.

Ione has been going to school on horseback. Millard rides with her on one horse and she on another. One day one of the horses got down and couldn't get up until it was shoveled out.

**B**efore I stop my epistle I think I should tell you about Iva. We don't think of her in the role of a heroine, but her courage is remarkable. There she is with just Dorothy and all alone so far as the work is concerned. Every day she has to pump a great big tank full of water. I tried it a time or two, and after about three minutes I was tired out. Nearly every day, too, she pumps her well dry. Each day she splits wood for two stoves, besides doing all her chores of milking, watering, feeding, etc. Then she comes in the house and cheerfully goes about the getting of a big meal. The road from her place to the gravel is filled with snow. It seems as if it would be weeks before she could get out. She was getting awfully low on supplies and had no way of getting to town. We were almost out of kerosene. One lamp went

out Tuesday night, but we still had a little kerosene in the other lamp. She had run out of gas for her gas lamp some days before. Her wood was getting short, and she needed to have some more hauled. Her wagons were so deep in snow that they couldn't be moved without shoveling. She tried to get help, but neither Wesley nor Jess could help her. I certainly felt sorry for her. At last Jimmy Miller came over, and we hauled wood; Mr. Moore brought out a few supplies, and so now I think she must be fixed for a little while. I doubt if she has any money to speak of, but no complaint comes from her. And just think! Every day for the last three or four weeks has been below zero, and Iva has to do all this work in such bitter weather. Her outbuildings are poor and the cold just pours into them.

**T**his morning was the coldest we have had — 26 degrees below zero with a bitter wind. It is getting cold again tonight. When Dad came in from the milking, he asked me if I was busy. I stopped my writing and went out to assist him in any way I could. He then asked me if I thought that little can which I put under the eaves for the purpose of catching the water where the eaves leaked would be about full of water and need emptying. You see, the situation hasn't gone beyond the possibility of humor.

Right now the clock is striking nine. Dad is dozing in his chair by the fire, and Mother is knitting. The telephone wire is singing quite merrily, and the roads are again blocked as badly as ever. With this homey picture I shall bring my long drawn-out letter to a close.

LOVE,

*Iona*



*The author and her cousin Ione taught in country schools two miles apart. Here, Ione's school (District Number 5 in Grant Township) on a less snowy day in 1936. (courtesy the author)*



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## Gardens are filled with little dry, brown monuments recalling the green plants that once grew there.

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### MEMORANDUM CONCERNING JULY 1936

This is July 18th and another hot day. The thermometer has been above the 100 mark every day since the Fourth of July. We planned to go to the community grounds to celebrate the Fourth, but before we were ready to go, I got frightened because the thermometer began to soar and it seemed as if the day couldn't go on without our dying from heat, a tornado, or lightning. Helen looked the house over and Mother helped her in an attempt to find some treatment for sunstroke and heat exhaustion. We went to the picnic prepared to heroically render first aid to the many who would surely succumb to the heat before the afternoon was over, and who would thereafter feel eternally grateful to the "Life-saver Longs." Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, we were not given the opportunity to be efficient (or hysterical). Yet the thermometer reached 113 degrees.

Heat, heat, heat! We have been literally buried in it ever since. It is all about us; we can't get away from it! It stifles and burns and saturates everything. We are drowning in a great, never-ending sea of heat. The beds feel actually hot most of the night. The furniture, too, is not immune. Sometimes we seek stools or chairs without backs in order to get away from the heat on *our* backs. People all over the countryside are sleeping out of doors, for the houses do not cool off in the evening. For a few days we kept the house shut to keep out the heat, but now it never becomes cool enough to warrant that.

People are getting tired, worn out. Sleep is

often impossible. In Iowa over 400 have died because of the heat; in the United States the number is over 5,000. It doesn't seem safe or sane to stay out in the bright sunshine of the afternoon. The thermometer usually stays above the century mark from nine A.M. until five or six in the evening.

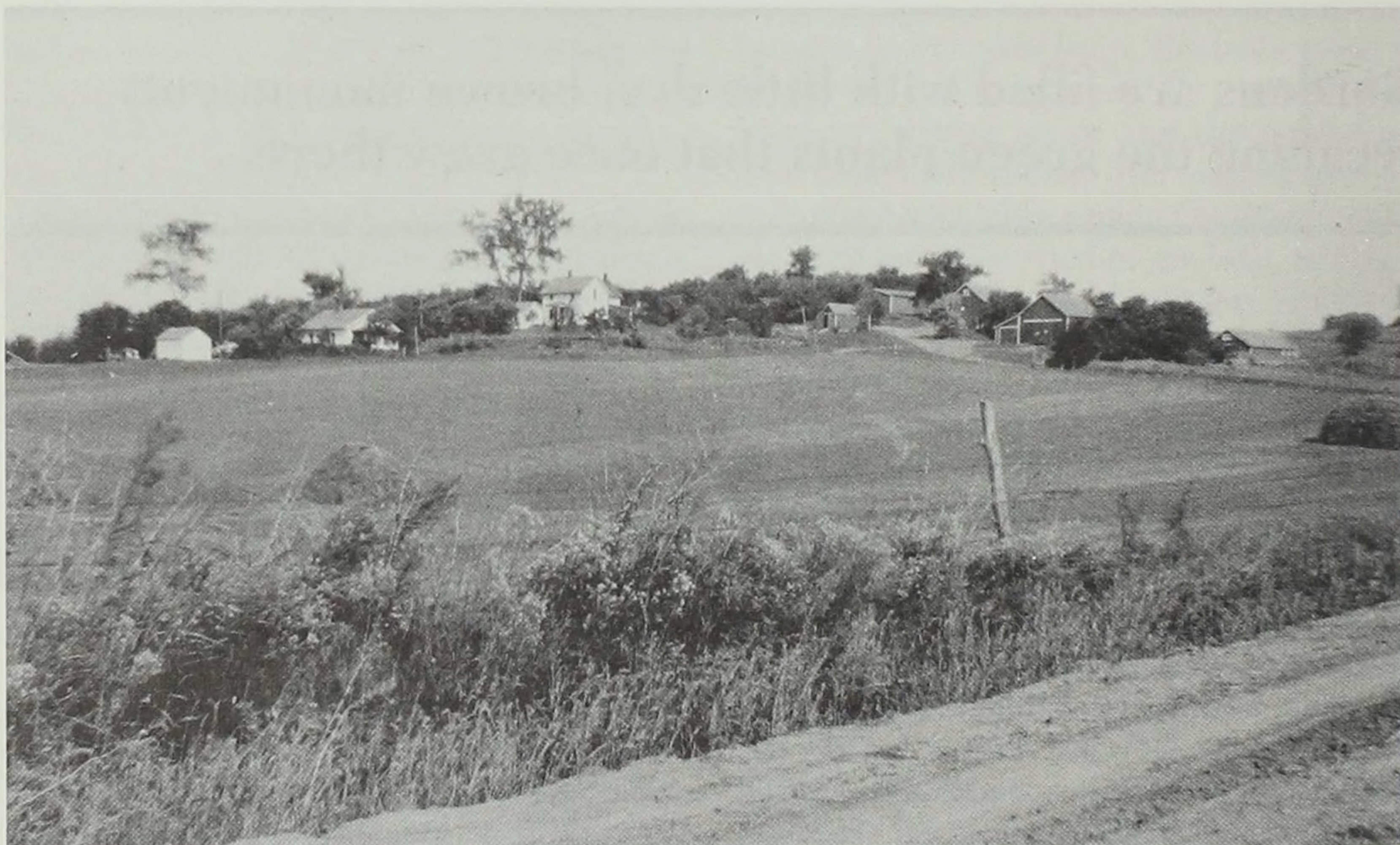
Day after day the sun glares down upon us. No longer does she veil herself from us with a cooling cloud but shoots her rays at us with saber-like strokes, and we are helpless before her onslaught.

For weeks we have had no rain — until this



*On the shady "community grounds" around Bethel Church, the Long family and their neighbors often gathered for picnics and celebrations. This photograph was taken in 1955; Bethel Church is no longer open. (courtesy the author)*





*The Long farm, Grant Township, 1942. Harold lived in the smaller home in the front. (courtesy the author)*

morning, and then not enough to help. Wells are going dry, creeks have long ago given up all their moisture, gardens are filled with little dry, brown monuments recalling the green plants which once grew there. The very leaves of the trees are becoming brown and sere and are falling to the ground prematurely. The grass crackles dryly under one's feet, and the heat from the ground makes the soles of one's shoes uncomfortably hot.

The corn, especially, has staged a brave fight for life. A couple of weeks ago it seemed as if it must have rain immediately, but none has been forthcoming. Mother said it seemed actually pitiful to her to watch it. The corn east of the house was her pride a few weeks ago — the best around. Day by day it curls a little more, gets a little browner, bends a little more forlornly, and at last, still bravely fighting, has to admit that it can give the farmer nothing this year. Mother thinks its struggle is almost human.

Many birds are dying from lack of water.

Harold saw a little squirrel go nearly crazy with delight one day when it found some water drops on a water pipe. Some of the chickens have died because of the heat.

The oats crop is almost a total loss. We are not even going to thresh. Much of the corn is past redemption. Rain would not help it anyway in all this heat, for then the corn would simply be cooked. Dad says he has never seen a drouth such as this promises to be. The men don't know how they are going to get their stock through the winter. Either they will have to be killed or expensive feed will have to be bought. It is a problem they have not yet solved. Mother and Cora have sold many of their chickens in order to conserve on feed. Other people are just as bad off as we are, and it remains to be seen how people will act and react to these new and hard experiences.

We expected to have lots of apples this year. They still hang to the trees but have not grown much for a long time. Mother doesn't know whether she will be able to make a little jell of



## A breeze was coming in the north window, and so I right speedily hied me off to my bed.

them or not. It is rather a terrible thing to see one's hopes for the entire year slowly yet surely disappear into nothingness.

Yesterday was the hottest day of our lives. The thermometer reached beyond the 116-degree mark. There was a breeze which, though hot, kept it from seeming hotter than usual. Last night, however, seemed a little worse than nights prior to it. Dad insisted on sleeping in his own bed, but Helen and I slept on some springs out in the yard and Mother slept on the cot on the porch. I lay watching the stars and trying to sleep. Frequently I would know that I was not the only one who was still awake for Helen would whisper something to me. I rolled, fought off bugs, drowsed, and rolled some more. Helen seemed to be quite peaceful, but at last had to cool her parched tongue by getting some cool water from the hydrant. After a time Mother made a similar excursion.

When sleep was upon us, we were awakened by a few — very few — errant drops of rain. Helen roused herself to ask if I was sprinkling her to make her think it was raining. I assured her that the water came from some little clouds and we dozed again. After a little while three or four more sprinkles roused us. I thought we might as well go in the house; so at about midnight Helen went to her own bed and I went to the downstairs bedroom. And was it HOT? IT WAS! Helen lay with her head on the window sill until she feared she would get callosities on her ears and had to forgo even that chance of getting a breath of fresh air some time before morning. Mother had to get another drink of water; Helen, too, felt the need of

moistening her dry mouth and made another excursion. We sprawled, rolled from one spot to another, felt sorry for ourselves, tried unsuccessfully to find a cool spot somewhere on our beds but to no avail. About four o'clock I went outdoors to get a drink and incidentally looked at the thermometer. Suffice it to say that the outdoor temperature was below ninety, even if the indoor temperature was not. I think the farther in one went, the hotter things became. I'm sure if my disposition were taken into account, that my "inside temperature" must have been about 150 degrees.

After a while Mother sought a change of scenery by moving to the davenport. She informed me that a breeze was coming in the north window, and so I right speedily hied me off to my bed. Such comfort! The breeze came in coolly from the east.

Helen still sweltered in her bed. At some time during her ordeal, she seriously contemplated a shower bath, but for some reason it



*A family portrait on a cooler summer day in the 1920s: Mr. and Mrs. B. L. Long, Irma, Harold, and Helen. (courtesy the author)*



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## It is rather a terrible thing to see one's hopes for the entire year slowly yet surely disappear into nothingness.

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never materialized. Finally in desperation she came downstairs to the porch. But again fortune turned against her, for the flies (which are more numerous this year than they have been for years) insisted that she remove her carcass again. Without any further argument she started back for her oven, but I insisted that she come in and share mine, as she would probably bake in her own and would probably just become nicely scorched in mine. I got her situated so she could catch the breeze when the breeze suddenly breathed its last, and so we sweltered together.

When Dad got up I went downstairs for a few minutes' rest on the porch, but I, too, was attacked by the flies. As a result a good share of our house got cleaned before breakfast. When we asked Dad how he got through the night he acted as if everything had been all right, but Helen reports that she heard many and sundry sighs issuing from his room throughout the time she was upstairs. One time she thought he was having a nightmare, but decided that it was only the climax of his sighs.

This morning we did have a great change in the program when a shower or two came, and it was cloudy for a few hours. We haven't had such a happening for many, many days. But

now the sun is shining again and the temperature has already reached 108.

Last, but not least, I must report the grasshopper situation. The grasshoppers are so bad that they are taking whole fields along with the drouth. The two seem to be racing to see which can put in the most effective work. People go miles and miles to get grasshopper poison when some is shipped in. Harold at last got several sacks. He reports that the sweet clover stems actually look rather yellow from the numerous grasshoppers on them. One of the popular stories which typically portray our situation at the present time goes as follows:

A farmer was walking along his cornfield when he suddenly heard a terrible noise. He went to seek the cause and found a big grasshopper "beating the soup" out of a little grasshopper. When questioned by the farmer, the big grasshopper explained that the little grasshopper was supposed to take two rows and was only taking one.

Well, conditions seem to be about as bad as they can be, but we still can be thankful for fly swatters and the ability to laugh. □

